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# President Bergeron's 98th Commencement Address

Katherine Bergeron

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The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

## A Whole New Way of Listening

**Remarks to the Class of 2016  
by President Katherine Bergeron  
98th Commencement Sunday  
May 22, 2016**

Members of the Board of Trustees both past and present; distinguished honorees and guests; colleagues in the alumni association and in the senior administration; faculty and staff; parents, family members, and friends; and, especially, the soon-to-be graduates of the remarkable class of 2016: it is a pleasure to see you all on this important day; it is a privilege to welcome you to this ceremony; and it is a great honor to be able to stand before you and declare the 98th Commencement exercises of Connecticut College now open.

Today's ceremony includes a number of highlights, including an address delivered by a member of the class of 2016; the presentation of two end-of-year prizes; the conferring of an honorary doctor of letters on our distinguished commencement speaker; and, finally, the awarding of 4 master's degrees and 429 baccalaureate degrees to this year's graduates. All of this follows our usual conventions, but we have one more surprise saved for the very end. So this 98th commencement is going to be a little bit different: a unique ceremony for a uniquely talented group of graduates: the beautiful and unconventional class of 2016.

I was reflecting: the interval of your four years here has also been somewhat unconventional, in a sense. Since your arrival in the summer of 2012, your class has witnessed the beginnings of a slow evolution at this College. For one thing, you have watched the physical renewal of our campus in one of the more active periods of rebuilding in recent history. The newly renovated Science Center in New London Hall opened during your first semester. And a transformed Shain Library was ready for your final year. In between, the Zachs Hillel House sprang up on North Campus — the first new stand-alone building this College has seen in 50 years.

But your four years here have been a significant period of knowledge building, as well. Since 2012, your faculty has together produced more than 60 books, 450 articles, and mounted more than 200 exhibitions and performances. The College has acquired almost 20 million dollars in funding to support teaching, research, and creative activity. Some of you have been directly involved in this work as research assistants and even as co-authors on papers.

Even more impressive, with your arrival, this same faculty undertook a project to renovate our whole approach to liberal education — an effort that resulted in a pioneering new curriculum that many of you helped inspire. And now we are poised to complete a new strategic plan that, again, you all helped to shape, a plan that will ensure that the Connecticut College you have known will not only maintain its vitality but also become an even more vibrant institution in its second century.

But just as you have watched the evolution of this College, so have we watched you evolve. And now here we are, at your commencement, celebrating that evolution. I was speaking with a colleague recently who commented that commencement is almost unique among rituals in its focus on the here and now. So many other ceremonial occasions either look back over past accomplishments, or look ahead toward future potential. A commencement certainly touches on these things, but its main purpose is to linger on the present moment, to mark your success in achieving a degree that represents not just a significant academic attainment but also (dare I say it?) a rite of passage into adulthood.

For me, the unqualified pleasure that comes with this rite of passage has to do with seeing what has happened to all of you. You were just sophomores when I arrived at Conn, and it's astonishing to see how much you have grown during that time. This year, as we were watching you in your thesis defenses, or during the presentations of your senior integrated projects, or at poster sessions, or in the community-based initiatives or the startups you developed, or in the classrooms where you did student teaching, or in your last athletic playoffs, or during your Fulbright interviews or your TEDx talks, or at the senior art show, or in your culminating recitals or screenings or theatrical performances, or in the very last Eclipse of your Conn career. . . . we were all sitting there marveling at the competent, thoughtful, articulate, and compassionate people you have become. It's something that the faculty and I — and of course your family members — perceive even more than you do right now. But I can tell you this: seeing that transformation is the whole reason we are here; it's one of truly great rewards of the academic life; and it's what we're celebrating today.

A couple of weeks ago I saw a documentary, made by a student filmmaker at Conn, that featured several members of the class of 2016 reflecting on their experiences. In one sequence, the filmmaker asks: "if you had the chance to do it all over again, would you?" and most replied unequivocally, "yes." The question I want to ask you all now is not would you do it again but what did you do it for? What larger purpose will this education serve? A number of you, I know, are headed into service professions like teaching or medicine; others of you plan to start your own businesses or give back in other ways, by pursuing your art or writing or doing research; I know at least one who is planning to seek public office; and most of you, from what I've seen, have thought hard about changing the world. Whatever your path, it is my fervent hope that the same passion and purpose will stay with you long after you leave this hillside and bring deeper meaning to all the things you choose to do.

And you will need it. You are entering a world of unimaginable complexity and challenge, during a time when the resolution of age-old conflicts seems more remote than ever. Just this past year, you have watched vast migrations of people seeking asylum from violence and oppression. You have seen great and emerging powers confront each other in nearly every corner of the globe. You have witnessed the specter of terror loom up from Paris to Beirut to Brussels to San Bernardino. And you have experienced it all in a fractious political climate where those aspiring to lead instead curry favor by appealing to our baser instincts rather than to our common humanity or the common good.

And yet, even as I say that, I have to acknowledge that this was also a year in which the Pope came to remind us again of our responsibility to each other and to the planet, and — for the first time in history — doing so in the context of addressing climate change. That was big.

This was also a year in which a team of physicists from around the world proved the existence of gravitational waves, thereby confirming a major part of Einstein's 100-year-old theory of general relativity and fundamentally changing our understanding of the cosmos. That was bigger. And perhaps more important, like the Pope's message, it was hopeful.

In fact, in all the dense astrophysical discussion that accompanied the news, I was struck by a comment from Dr. Alberto Vecchio — one of the participating researchers — describing the deeper meaning and purpose of the discovery. This is what he said: "We have opened a whole new way of listening that will allow us to discover phenomena we have never seen before." Think about that for a moment. A whole new way of listening. Leading us to things we have never seen before. This strikes me not just as good news for science. It may also be one of the most important lessons for our time: a new way of listening that has the power to change the world as we know it.

That idea makes me think about a talk that Bryan Stevenson delivered on this campus at the beginning of April. The talk was about how you can change the world, and its main points are worth recalling here. Stevenson, as you may know, is a highly acclaimed public interest attorney and founder of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama — and he has spent his life defending people on death row. He's written about his life's work in a powerful book called "Just Mercy," which some of you may have read. There were four things he said you have to do to change the world. The first thing he said was you have to GET PROXIMATE. You can't make a difference without getting close to the people or places you want to affect. Second, he said, you have to work to CHANGE THE NARRATIVE. The way you represent the world has a lot to do with how you can change it. Third, he said, you have to HOLD ONTO YOUR HOPE. No positive movement ever came out of despair. But at the same time, he said, you have to be willing to BE UNCOMFORTABLE. No progress or growth is going to be possible without your personal discomfort.

And it occurs to me, as I think back on this talk, that all of these actions, in some fundamental way, have to do with listening. It's listening that allows you to get proximate. Listening is always the first step to changing the narrative. It's by the effort of listening that you open yourself to new possibilities that bring hope. And, of course, by listening, really listening, you will experience discomfort, the noise and discord of those things you don't recognize or understand. You can't change the world, in other words, without cultivating a whole new way of listening. And we are counting on all of you graduates of this great class to do just that: to open your ears and your hearts, to keep pushing the limits, in order to show us those things that we did not believe were possible.

Class of 2016, we love you and we are proud of you. I know you will listen well as you move forward in the world. Thank you for bringing your eyes, your ears, and your passion to this special place. I wish you great happiness and success in your life after Connecticut College, and I look forward to seeing you back here often and welcoming you home.

*(Remarks as prepared by President Katherine Bergeron.)*